

*Maxwell, Alexander: Choosing Slovakia: Slavic Hungary, the Czechoslovak Language and Accidental Nationalism.*

I. B. Tauris Publishers, London, New York 2009, 262 S., ISBN 978-1-84885-074-3.

Rarely does a title capture the spirit of a book as eloquently as here: Alexander Maxwell has produced an intelligent, irreverent, idiosyncratic, and in his own words ironic narrative about the birth and ultimate success of Slovak nationalism, defined as the belief in a “Slovak nation” speaking a “Slovak language.” His argument is interesting throughout, despite some inaccuracies and slips that could easily have been addressed within the author’s own framework of interpretation.

Maxwell places himself firmly within modernization theory’s “peasants into patriots” framework. But rather than studying why this transformation happened, he takes the process of nationalization for granted and focuses on the many different conceptualizations of “the nation” circulating in the nineteenth and early twentieth century among the Slavic speaking elites of what is today Slovakia. Instead of linearity and teleology, Maxwell highlights contingency and failure in order to argue that “the historical forces that caused Slovak particularist nationalism were unintended consequences of other nationalist movements” (185).

The author approaches his sources with considerable sophistication, taking the discourses and wording of his actors deeply seriously as testimonies to their world views and horizons of expectation – ideas and schemes that are often at odds with contemporary categories, or with how things turned out. When Ľudovít Štúr in 1843 in a pamphlet justifying the new orthography he had just designed called Slovak a “dialect” (nářečja) and Slovaks a “tribe” (kmen), Maxwell insists that these words were not chosen randomly and asks why Štúr used them, rather than simply presuming – as scholars have been prone to do – that what Štúr “really meant” was that the Slovaks formed a separate “nation” with its own “language.” Such careful philological hermeneutics gives his reasoning considerable authority.

Maxwell also seeks to sharpen our tools for analyzing arguments about language and nationality by developing a terminology capable of singling out the different

meanings of “language.” This term, he argues, refers to at least three different phenomena: 1) standardized conventions for spelling and grammar; 2) speech varieties used by people living on a certain territory, varieties that are held to be highly homogeneous and distinct in comparison with speech varieties in neighbouring territories; and 3) an idea of a national language, implicitly juxtaposed with the mere “dialects” contained within it. Though often conflated in political and public debate, Maxwell is adamant that historians should keep the three meanings separate and learn from their colleagues in linguistics that the difference between “language” and “dialect” is a political issue, not a linguistic one. Since the Slavic speech varieties found around 1800 in Upper Hungary and the neighbouring regions to the west, north, and east formed a continuum, the question of which of these were to be subsumed under which standard languages (or “scripts” as Maxwell calls such conventions about orthography, grammar, and vocabulary) had no answer in any intrinsic qualities of these speech varieties. Historical and political factors determined the issue.

Maxwell outlines the many ideas circulating among Slovak intellectuals since the late eighteenth century about how to classify these speech varieties. Was Slavic one language and if yes, how many dialects did it contain? How did the Slavic language(s) and dialects correlate with the Slavic nation(s) or tribes? And very importantly: which script(s) were the different Slavs to use? Support for a script could have many different motivations, and the efforts of Bernolák, Palkovič, Kollár, Štúr, Hattala and others to produce new or defend old ones for the Slovaks did not, Maxwell argues, stem from any conviction that the Slovaks formed a distinct nation with a distinct language in need of its own script. For some, confessional concerns were more significant than ideas of nationality, and where these prevailed the imagined nation could be All-Slavic, Hungaro-Slavic, or Czechoslovak. Also, changing political circumstances frequently brought Slovak intellectuals to change script or to redefine their imagined national community. The victory of Slovak linguistic and national particularism came only with the consolidation of mass literacy in Slovak in the inter-war years, ironically so since education in Slovak was believed to strengthen the unity of the Czechoslovak nation, an idea which according to Maxwell was deeply indebted to Kollár’s belief that a single language could have multiple literary dialects.

Maxwell is most original when dealing with linguistic theories and arguments. One quickly gets used to *Bibličtina*, *Bernolákovčina*, *Štúrovčina* or *Hattalovčina* instead of ‘Czech’ or ‘Slovak’ and sees the advantages of this terminology. Though less thorough, his discussion of Slovak concepts of nationality has good points, but his demonstration that Slovak nineteenth century intellectuals distinguished between a Hungarian (though of course not Magyar!) political nation to which they repeatedly professed their loyalty, and a Slavic, Hungaro-Slavic, or Czechoslovak cultural-linguistic nation to which they felt emotionally committed, is not as new as he seems to suggest. Ideas of dual nationality were common all over the Habsburg Empire (and in other multi-ethnic states) as numerous studies in recent years have noticed. Nor is the study of failed national projects as rare as claimed, and one wonders why Maxwell does not refer to Jiří Kořalka’s seminal (and even in his context highly relevant) work on the similar competition of models in Bohemia and Austria in the early nineteenth century.

Regrettably, Maxwell seems insufficiently familiar with the historiography on the Cisleithanian half of the Monarchy. Inaccuracies abound in the coverage of things Czech ranging from the spelling of Czech first names in Slovak (Ján and Jozef instead of Jan and Josef), or messed-up renderings of “český” as “Czech” where “Bohemian” was mandatory, to a seriously flawed summary of nationalization processes in Moravia. Even in 1905, the Czech encyclopaedia “Ottův slovník naučný” defined the south-easternmost corner of Moravia as part of “Slovácko” and its inhabitants as “Slovaks,” but Maxwell pays no attention to this. A fuller discussion of how the “Czech nation in Bohemia and Moravia” took shape before 1918 could have further illuminated why the Czech elites in newborn Czechoslovakia, though convinced about the national unity of Czechs and Slovaks, never tried to introduce standard Czech in the schools of Slovakia. Inspiration from Kollár’s ideas of reciprocity alone cannot explain this.

The neglect of Moravia points to a final weakness of the book. Curiously, Maxwell seems to be as inattentive to ethnonyms as he is hyper-attentive to orthography and linguonyms. His narrative is plastered with “Slovaks,” “Czechs,” and “Magyars” as if all his actors fitted seamlessly into one or the other of these presumably natural ethnic categories. There is no discussion of bilingualism or ethnic indifference, and far too little attention to how “tribes” or “ethnicities” are constructed categories of practice just as categories of nationhood. Maxwell thus leaves a loophole for the kind of linearity and determinism he set out to dismantle, since eventually he ends up with two languages perfectly matching the ethnicities that he let enter his narrative back in the eighteenth century.